

CHAPTER 3



The Campaign

We arrived in Seychelles in time to observe three rallies, two held by the United Opposition and one by the SPPF in the last weekend before polling. The United Opposition rally at Beau Vallon and the SPPF one at Victoria held on Sunday, 8 November were both major events with full party trappings and colour, and thousands of cheering party supporters. The rallies followed much the same format: political speeches and exhortations by the party leadership to a chanting, highly enthusiastic crowd. Both camps in their speeches sought either to explain and stress the benefits of the draft constitution, or to demolish the merits claimed for the draft. The charges and counter-charges were vintage stuff. At the SPPF rally, a full line-up of party officials was led by the President and Government Ministers who addressed the crowd. The party faithful were reminded of the economic benefits to the country and citizens under SPPF rule, of the rights and freedoms guaranteed under the draft constitution and the importance of voting in favour of the draft.

Speaking with many in the crowd at these rallies, we gained the clear impression that the ordinary citizen was not well informed about the details and real significance of the draft constitution. It was clear, too, that they seemed resolved to vote along party lines.

The establishment of the United Opposition brought about a certain measure of cohesion and strategy in the stand against the draft constitution, and this was evident in political rallies and in joint publications setting out the their viewpoint in the 'Vote No' campaign. Nonetheless, the grouping was riven by the natural instability of competing interests. A television debate between President René and Sir James Mancham, which was eventually cancelled, was opposed by several opposition parties who did not wish to broaden the debate issues beyond the Referendum question. Party interests also affected the division of political funds and the air-time issue, the DP claiming a proportionately larger share because of the far greater size in its political following.

The campaign was pitched at the purely political level. In that sense, any attempt by the political parties themselves to explain the draft in strictly legal or constitutional terms was bound to be taken as party propaganda. A significant feature of the campaign was the range and volume of published material put out by all political parties, from newsletters to communiqués. All parties made use of the television, radio and print media for their campaign. There was no report to us of any unfair restrictions on campaign activity. Inevitably, there were many complaints against the Seychelles Broadcasting Corporation (SBC) for its alleged favouritism towards the SPPF in the campaign coverage.

Media coverage

The role of the media was particularly crucial in the second stage, even more so than in the July election. The combined coverage by radio, television and print media meant that there was no lack of opportunity to present argument and counter argument on the draft. Much of the news reporting was issue-related or politically motivated. Media coverage, therefore, on the whole, was committed to party political positions. There was no neutral educational media programme. In the circumstances prevailing during the campaign period, it was virtually impossible to project any position that was likely to be taken as neutral and independent.

The *Nation*, the only daily newspaper, provided prominent coverage of events. During the campaign period, it carried an item on the draft constitution in almost every issue. On 23 October it published a 16-page 'presentation' on the draft by way of a special supplement to its issue of that day. It offered a fairly detailed commentary, but one that was seen as a serious misrepresentation of the draft provisions. The fact that it was owned and operated by the Government made the *Nation* a natural target of accusations of bias. We would note, however, that the opposition were able to present their viewpoints through their own party newspapers, the DP through the *Seychelles Weekly* and Parti Seselwa through the *Regar*.

Almost the first complaint laid before us concerned the claimed inequality of air-time on television. Of all media forms, television was considered the most popular and offered the best exposure nationally. For purposes of the political campaign, the SBC had split the available broadcast time, allocating 110 minutes to the 'Yes' vote (SPPF) and 110 minutes to the 'No' vote. The time allotted to the latter had to be shared among the seven parties comprising the United Opposition, allowing barely 15 minutes of television time per party. This was naturally seen by the opposition as totally inadequate and inequitable. The opposition claimed that either equal time should have been allowed for all opposition groups (a claim generally seen as excessive in view of the vast differences in electoral support among the opposition parties), or an agreed minimum time allowed to each party. On behalf of the opposition parties, the Director of Elections proposed that the air-time be divided on a 60/40 basis, leaving it to the United Opposition to share the longer of the time-slots. But this was rejected by SBC. For the opposition, this was yet another example of SBC's linkage and bias towards SPPF which seriously compromised the independence the Corporation was supposed to maintain or at least be seen to be maintaining.

Accusations of bugging were also made against the SBC during the taping of the final party political broadcast by the opposition. It was alleged that the taped programme was being secretly recorded, and discovered only when part of the soundtrack was accidentally broadcast live nationally. This was taken as a sinister attempt to record an opposition speech ahead of transmission time, presumably to be passed on for the use and advantage of SPPF before it recorded its own final party broadcast. The SBC denied these allegations in the

strongest terms. But the incident further demonstrated the apparent and unfortunate lack of trust and confidence in a media organisation which has the potential to do much good work in these critical times.